Pentagon Papers leak pleased Nixon

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WASHINGTON (AP) — When the Pentagon Papers were leaked to the media in 1971, the Nixon administration reacted with fury and sought a Supreme Court order to suppress publication. Privately, however, President Nixon sought to use the explosive disclosures to embarrass the Democrats.

The National Archives released 168,000 pages of Nixon White House documents yesterday. They showed an administration with a siege mentality in its determination not to become the first to lose a war.

Nixon and his heirs fought for years to keep the papers under seal.

They show the president:

■ Ordering a seven-page list of government officials who had defected to Sen. George S. McGovern and rating them on how sympathetic they were to Nixon's 1972 Democratic rival.

■ Directing aide John D. Ehrlichman to "implement a theft" at the Brookings Institution, a think tank with a perceived liberal bent, to steal Vietnam documents that the Nixon people believed were stashed there. Nixon believed they would show his predecessor, Lyndon B. Johnson, ordered a bombing halt in Vietnam a few day before the 1968 election in hopes of throwing the election to Nixon's opponent, Hubert H. Humphrey.

■ Seeking to retaliate against the press. One memo said, "The *N.Y. Times* is finished in the WH (White House)" because of its publication of the Pentagon Papers.

In 1971, Daniel Ellsberg, a Pentagon strategist, turned against the war and leaked to *The New York Times* the massive war history that had been ordered by Robert S. McNamara, defense secretary in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations.

The Times started publishing the papers June 13, 1971. The Nixon administration sought a court order to bar further publication on the grounds that national security had been breached. But on June 30 the Supreme Court upheld the *Times* and publication resumed.

Two days after the first *Times* story, Nixon, meeting with aides and Republican leaders from Congress, had a much milder reaction. While he was concerned with security, he said, the papers chiefly revealed the flaws of Democratic direction of the war.

"The president said his posture was that this was a family fight for the Democrats. . . . It all took place within a previous administration," wrote aide Patrick J. Buchanan, a participant in the meeting.

The Buchanan memo offered a glimpse of a Republican president strategizing about how to turn the disclosure to his advantage.

Publication of the Pentagon Papers caused a sensation. Their evidence that the U.S. government had deliberately misled the public on the conduct of the war lent impetus to the antiwar movement.